

# CCME leads the way in Christian-Muslim relations

by Julie B. Sevig



CCME envisioning session

When it comes to Christian-Muslim relations, LSTC is a leader. In the ELCA, it's not a stretch to say it is *the* leader. Since the 1980s, LSTC has offered courses in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, initially under the leadership of Harold Vogelaar, Mark Thompson and Ghulam-Haider Aasi. Supported by an endowment, LSTC launched a professorship chair of Christian-Muslim and interfaith relations (held by Mark Swanson) and A Center for Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (CCME) in 2006.

CCME, housed at LSTC, has been and continues to be, a much-needed resource for the church and beyond ever since its founding. Its mission is to build bridges of mutual understanding, respect and cooperation among people of all faiths. It was founded on the conviction that "Christians, Muslims, and neighbors of other faith traditions, in their co-humanity, created by and responsible before God, are called to know, respect and learn from one another, despite or even because of our differences."

With the retirement of Michael Shelley as director of CCME and the approaching retirement of Aasi in 2018, President James Nieman and leaders of CCME decided to launch a re-envisioning process to help assess its priorities and direction. Not only was the leadership shifting, but the social context and political climate also has changed, from one emphasizing interfaith dialogue to multi-faith and inter-religious engagement.

In determining the center's needs and future, the center took up this task over 11 months, to:

- audit its outreach strengths and LSTC's inter-religious instruction,
- survey the larger landscape for inter-religious relations, efforts and education,
- think about CCME's mission going forward,
- consider the purposes of inter-religious education and make recommendations.

Key findings are at the end of this article.

Carol Schersten Lahurd, distinguished affiliate professor of world religions and long-time colleague at CCME, led the process. And a team was formed that included church and other seminary and Islamic community partners to evaluate the changing climate for the center, and to further enhance the seminary's related courses.

In May 2018 the task began in earnest. Working with Lahurd were Swanson, associate director of CCME and Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim and Interfaith Relations, and Sara Trumm, new director of CCME (see related story). Lahurd said the three were well suited for the task; all have lived and worked in Islamic countries, and their gifts complement one another. Lahurd describes herself as "organized to a fault, and sees connections across disciplines." She cites Trumm's people skills and Swanson as "a visionary, deep and connected."

Committed to monthly meetings, the team reached out to Christian and Muslim constituents (alumni, community leaders, students, and interfaith partners) through a survey, two in-person consultations with area and national leaders, and an assessment of inter-religious curricular practices. What became clear was how much the process dovetailed with the Churchwide Assembly's adoption this summer of "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment," said Lahurd, who with Swanson had worked on the Task Force.

"Our denomination has strong partners with LSTC and CCME, which have worked so much to bring response to societal change and increased diversity," Lahurd said.

## Shift in culture

In recent years, the urgency and importance to interact and work together with people of various faiths has increased, which played a key role in this re-envisioning.

"Engagement is always the key word in our name for me," Trumm said. "It is where I center my vision for our programming. The need for bringing people of different faiths together has largely grown and expanded, not only for us as a seminary and in congregations, but for the larger population." While there had been a considerable desire for interfaith dialogue 10-20 years ago, she said that the move toward creative and social justice action has become much more important now, both within curricular and extra-curricular endeavors.

LSTC's Public Church emphasis has created a desire for talking about, and understanding, the theology behind interfaith issues. CCME has for years been training leaders in churches, and even worldwide, about these issues.

"We discovered through the survey that we need to improve our outreach to alumni," Trumm said. Resources are available for the communities in which they serve. We need to make sure they know we're here to support them." This might happen through adult-forum study guides or help in navigating community/ individual discussions when



community members are fearful about something they heard in the media.

Providing academic learning about Islam (from credible sources), helping navigate interactions with those who are different from ourselves, developing our bridge-building skills, and having the courage to speak up when injustices are present are all a part of forming inclusive communities. These things are equally important when addressing other systemic issues, such as racism, anti-Semitism, or homophobia, Trumm said.

“To be able to speak to everyday issues with knowledge and experience is something the seminary and the center have seen as important. We’re educating and cultivating leadership among our students, needed for the communities in the many contexts they’re in,” she said. Part of that, she added, is simply teaching and encouraging people to tell real stories about people they know. “Share your experience and no one can argue with that.”

The re-envisioning process also provided focus for the center. “We try to do everything—but we just can’t,” Trumm said. “We need to focus on students here, the Chicago area, alumni and their congregations and communities.” It’s also important to partner with national organizations like the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign and staff of the churchwide organization, or local partners such as the American Islamic College, other seminaries, and other Muslim leaders and community organizations, she said.

Those involved with CCME are confident about CCME’s future, and are now eager to add staff—preferably a Muslim woman to help run the center and/or teach.

While building on the focus areas brought to light in the re-envisioning process, the hope is to also be “open to things that come up, what Mark calls ‘maintaining a posture of responsiveness,’” Trumm said. “We have been affirmed in what we were doing. CCME has long been showing the way in how to do this important work.”

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## Summary highlights

Since its founding, CCME has observed a cultural move from interfaith dialogue to an approach centered on multi-faith and inter-religious engagement, which led it to rethink programming emphasis and skills needed in leadership. They also considered whether the make-up of the leadership team reflects its commitments.

The re-envisioning process resulted in key learnings:

1. Expanding circles of engagement, which are locally focused and grounded.
2. Build and tend relationships (alumni, Muslim communities, etc.).
3. Maintain a posture of responsiveness.
4. Break down the curricular/extracurricular barrier (courses and experiences).
5. Address systemic issues.

## Sara Trumm named director of CCME



Sara Trumm was recently appointed director of A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (CCME). She served as interim director since July 2018 and as the center’s program coordinator since 2008.

“Sara will do an outstanding job as director of CCME,” said

Esther Menn, dean of academic affairs when the announcement was made. “Building on extensive experience in cross-cultural and interfaith relations, including 11 years as coordinator of CCME, Sara is prepared to take the center into the future. She has a joyous presence and a commitment to hospitality, qualities that open doors and foster interfaith friendships and partnerships.”

“I am excited to take on this new role with CCME,” Trumm said. “The re-envisioning process helped us see the intersectionality of the systemic issues we’re trying to address. I look forward to building even stronger relationships with the many partners CCME has in the Christian and Muslim communities to expand the circles of multi-faith and inter-religious engagement.”

Before joining CCME, Trumm served at the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, India, and at the Global Mission Institute at Luther Seminary. She has traveled and studied in Egypt, East and West Africa, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

“I recognize the privilege I have had with all of these experiences and how so many people who have guided me have expanded my worldview. I want to use my privilege to ensure inclusion and to promote other voices,” Trumm said.

Trumm received a BA in psychology and religion from Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minn., and a master of arts in cross-cultural studies from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. She is a community ambassador through Interfaith Youth Core and is a qualified administrator for the Intercultural Development Inventory.